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Truman and the CIA

Former President Truman speaks with unique authority about the CIA inasmuch as the agency was organized in his Administration. When he writes, as he did in this newspaper last Sunday, that there "is something about the way the CIA has been functioning that is casting a shadow over our historic position" we can rightly sit up and take notice. Mr. Truman is concerned that the agency's operational functions have gotten out of hand. So are many Americans.

The President makes perfectly clear that a central intelligence agency was an urgent requirement when the CIA was formed. The Chief Executive is virtually blanketed by intelligence documents from many existing agencies. He needs a central organization charged with the duty of assembling various estimates and presenting the facts without the tincture of special pleading. The intelligence reports of the various armed services obviously must reflect, consciously or unconsciously, the institutional bias of services with their own policies to defend.

The trouble is that over the years the CIA has become increasingly entangled in its own operations. It has seemed less an objective interpreter of events than a rival policy arm with a very sharp axe to grind. As Mr. Truman remarks:

I never had any thought that when I set up the CIA that it would be injected into peace-time cloak and dagger operations. Some of the complications and embarrassments that I think we have experienced are in part attributable to the fact that this quiet intelligence arm of the President has been so removed from its intended role that it is being interpreted as a symbol of sinister and mysterious foreign intrigue—and a subject for enemy cold war propaganda.

President Truman emphasizes his confidence in the patriotism and ability of CIA officials. That is not in dispute. What is at issue is the wisdom of combining within the CIA functions that should be separate. Moreover, there is real doubt whether any arm of the United States Government should be involved in subversion of another government. Experience suggests that this is an area in which Americans do not excel. Morality suggests that it drains this country's professed principles of meaning when a shadowy arm of the Government appears to practice the same subversion that we condemn in others.